

Creating the Great Seal

To devise a seal an artist was expected to know how to design and describe coats of arms, a study and profession called heraldry. The Founding Fathers wanted the Seal to reflect their beliefs that Providence blessed the new republic and that the United States would find a unique place among the nations of the world. It was not an easy task. Even the great men of the First Committee, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams found it difficult.

In appearance, the new Seal was to possess a design on both the front (obverse) and back (reverse).

FIRST COMMITTEE

The First Seal device—or design—by Pierre du Simitière of Philadelphia, consulting artist to the committee in 1776, presents six symbols of European nations in the center of the shield to reflect the multi-national American population. The final seal incorporated the eye, shield and motto from this sketch.

Surrounding the European coats of arms are the arms of the 13 American colonies.

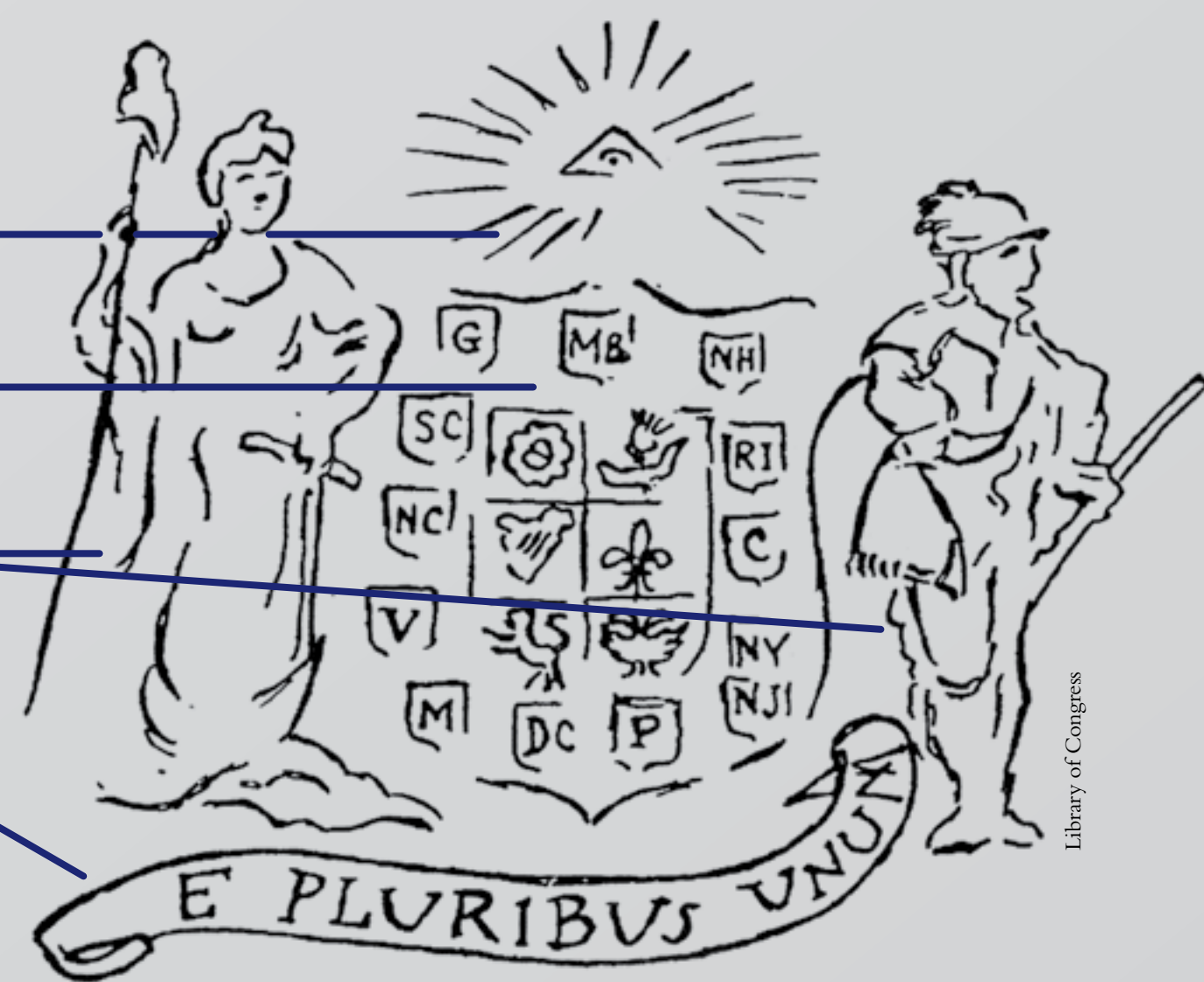
Rules of heraldry apply to this first seal design.

Crest

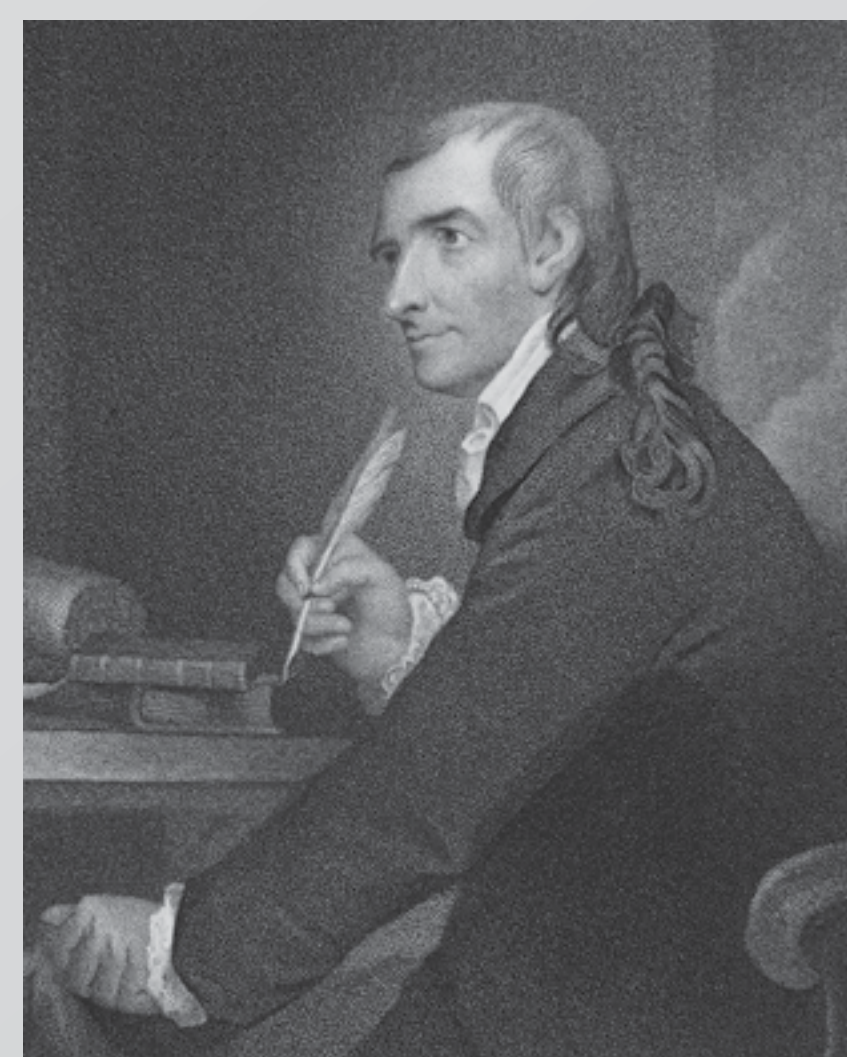
Shield or arms

Supporters

Motto and scroll



SECOND COMMITTEE



Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania

Francis Hopkinson created the second attempt at a design in 1780. From this came the stars, the olive branch and the striped shield.



Courtesy of the National Archives (ARC#919232)

Courtesy of the National Archives (ARC#919235)

THIRD COMMITTEE



Courtesy of the National Archives (ARC#919258)



Courtesy of the National Archives (ARC#919258)

Artist William Barton provided Congress with these designs in May 1782. The front (obverse) was too complicated, but the symbol of an eagle was drawn from it to become the centerpiece of the final seal. In contrast, the pyramid remained essentially the same for the reverse of the seal.

THE FINAL DESIGN

By 1782, the wait for a seal had lasted six years and involved three committees. Three artists had produced drawings that Congress had not accepted. The end of the war with England was in sight, and the need for a seal to represent the new nation was becoming urgent.

Finally, Charles Thomson, Secretary of the Continental Congress, created a seal that Congress accepted on the first vote in June 1782. He borrowed elements from previous designs to create a Seal that reflected the independence of the new nation.



Courtesy of the National Archives (ARC#919237)

Thomson's original design shows the eagle's wings pointing down. Artist William Barton changed them to an upwards, or "displayed" position.



Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania

Artist William Barton modified other aspects of Thomson's work before Congress approved the Seal. Beside the wings, he changed the stripes from chevron shaped to vertical and specified there be 13 arrows and 13 stars in the constellation, as seen in the image of the Seal's imprint.



U.S. Department of State

Thompson's creation reflects his indifference to heraldry but awareness of the new nation's ideals and identity. Above is an imprint of the first Great Seal.



Courtesy of the National Archives (ARC#919242)

Die of the first Great Seal of the United States, now in the National Archives, reflects Barton's modifications.



Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania

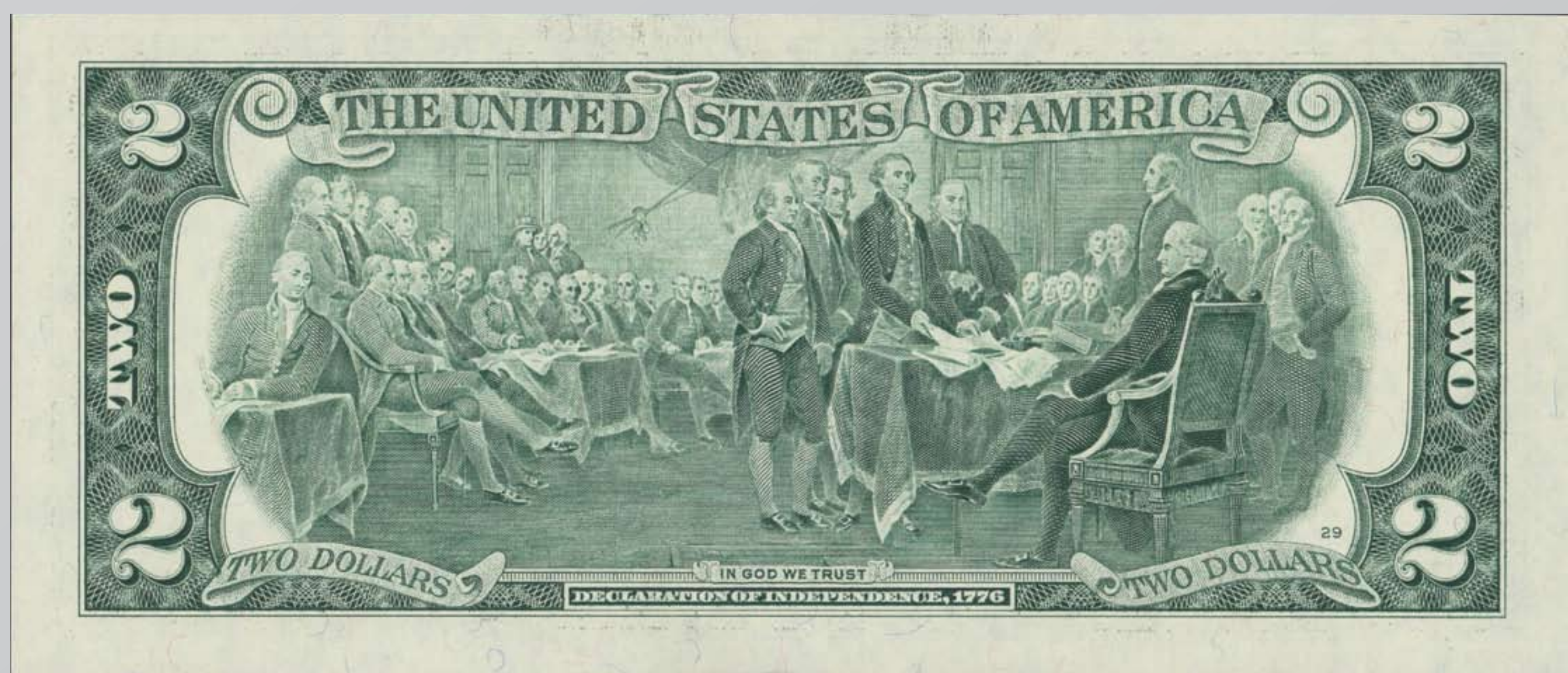
Charles Thomson, as first keeper of the Seal from 1782–1789, witnessed and signed some of the earliest documents of the U.S. before the Constitution was ratified in 1789.

From the Continental Congress

Resolved: That these United Colonies are, and, of right, ought to be, Free and Independent States; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British crown...

Resolved: That Dr. Franklin, Mr. J. Adams and Mr. Jefferson, be a committee, to bring in a device [design] for a seal for the United States of America.

— July 4, 1776
From the Journals of the Continental Congress, Volume V



The two dollar bill features an image of the Declaration of Independence signing with the members of the first Seal committee standing by the document, John Adams is to the far left, Thomas Jefferson, holding his work in the center and Benjamin Franklin, near Jefferson to the far right.